

## The Splendors of Edo

When the Japanese city of Edo, now called Tokyo, became the seat of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1603, a long period of peace and prosperity in the country began. The Shogun passed a law requiring all provincial lords, or daimyōs, to live in Edo for half the year, bringing a huge population of wealthy lords and their retainers to the city. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the city experienced unprecedented prosperity as a center for trade and government. Local wealth encouraged the production and consumption of many luxury products especially geared toward the tastes of the devotees of the floating world, or Ukiyo.

As a Buddhist concept, the floating world implies an ascetic scorn of the cares and joys of everyday life, in order to concentrate on higher things. The floating world is ephemeral, whereas enlightenment is eternal. However, in secular life, particularly in wealthy circles, the term was redefined to hold the beauties of the floating world all the more attractive for being ephemeral. The woodblock prints of the period, sometimes called Ukiyo-e, or pictures of the floating world, celebrate many of these passing joys.

Many prints show highlights of the city: landscapes, city views, and buildings of which the residents were particularly proud. These included not only elaborate shrines and picturesque bridges but also busy areas of commerce, the theater district, and the Yoshiwara, the district where prostitution was allowed. In these scenes the city's wealthy men and their servants mix with its beauties.

Beautiful women, actors, and other popular figures are also favorite subjects of the prints of Edo. Whether celebrating the beauty of a courtesan, the strength of a wrestler, or the fierceness of an actor, the message of these prints is that the best of all can be found in Edo.